

Isaiah 11:1-5
The Rod of Jesse
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

It is hard to keep on going when one's circumstances are not only difficult but also getting more difficult. We can be hopeful in hard times when our circumstances are improving, even if only slowly and gradually. We may be in a hard way, but at least we know that we are coming out of it. Things may be bad, but at least they are getting better. It may be dark, but at least we can see the rising of the morning star. But when times are hard and getting harder, when it is dark and getting darker, when life is difficult and getting even more difficult, we are tempted to despair, to give up all hope.

The prophet Isaiah lived in such times. When he was living, things were getting worse and he knew it. He looked close to home, and he saw the growing apostasy of King Ahaz, the king of Judah. He saw King Ahaz's growing disinterest in the living and true God, the God of the Bible. He saw King Ahaz's growing enchantment with the vain idols of paganism and with the apparent success of the pagan Assyrian empire. Isaiah looked abroad and he saw the rise of the pagan Assyrian empire with its ruthless cruelty and insatiable greed and perverse idolatry. The Assyrian empire seemed unstoppable, and the future appeared to belong to it. Isaiah looked to the future with the eye of the prophet, and he saw the coming desolation of the land and the deportation of the people. Judah would be

conquered, Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, the Davidic throne would be overthrown, the Davidic crown would be cast to the ground, and the people of Israel would be dispersed among the pagan nations of the world. Things were bad, and they were getting worse.

Yet Isaiah did not despair. Isaiah did not lose hope because Isaiah was a man of faith. As a man of faith, he persevered through these difficult times. He was able to say to the Shepherd of his soul, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” In the midst of his dark situation, Isaiah saw that light which one can see only with the eye of faith.

We are today going to look at the reason for Isaiah’s persevering hope in the midst of a desperate situation. We will also seek to learn from Isaiah’s example because we too are often in difficult situations and we too are often tempted with discouragement. We will look at today’s passage under three headings: the Sprout, the Spirit and the Strategy.

We will begin by looking at the Sprout. At the end of chapter ten, Isaiah had compared the rising Assyrian empire to a whole forest of the mighty cedar trees from Lebanon. These were the most noble and impressive trees of the ancient world. These trees were tall and majestic and highly prized. Their trunks were sturdy, their branches wide and their foliage thick. Their wood was prized because it was fragrant, rot resistant and free of knots. It was suitable for everything from the ship’s mast and

the foundational beam to the intricately carved work of art. The cedar was truly the king of the forest in the ancient near east. Isaiah compared the Assyrian empire to an entire forest of these majestic trees.

Yet the mighty cedar did have a weakness relative to some other trees. Some trees have what we might call sucker power. As a botanical term, a sucker is a shoot rising from a subterranean stem or root. These are trees which, when cut down, come to life again. From the stump and roots, a multitude of suckers or shoots or sprouts will spring forth to begin the life of the tree anew. The mighty cedar is not one of these trees. When the woodsman's axe hews the cedar down, it puts out no new shoots. Once it falls, it falls forever, never to rise again as a living tree. The cedar stump will resist decay but it will never recover life.

At the end of chapter ten, we read that God will judge the Assyrian empire. He will cut down this metaphorical forest, and it will never rise again. God will also chasten Judah, and it too will be cut down and reduced to a stump. Yet there is a crucial difference. Judah is not here compared to a cedar tree but to a tree such as the mighty oak, a tree which, when cut down, puts out new growth and exhibits an indestructible vitality. In this special case, in this metaphor regarding Judah, the stump and roots put forth not a crowded multitude of little shoots but one mighty shoot which suddenly rises and far exceeds the original tree in stature and strength and fruitfulness.

The prophet referred to Judah as the stem of Jesse. When God judged Judah with the Babylonian exile, what was once the mighty tree of David and Solomon became the lowly stump of Jesse. Now who was Jesse? Jesse, of course, was the father of King David. Before his son David was exalted as king, Jesse had been an humble man from the insignificant little town of Bethlehem. His son David was originally a lowly shepherd, a keeper of sheep. The house of David in its fall would return to its lowly origins. So it is here prophetically called the stump of Jesse.

Yet Isaiah has hope. There is life in this stump, life which represents the indestructible vitality of the Davidic dynasty. The basis of this indestructible vitality is the covenant God made with David. When God made His covenant with David, it did include warnings. God warned that if any descendant of David upon David's throne sinned significantly, God would chasten him. And yet in that covenant, God promised that David's throne would not pass away. His kingdom would not be taken away from David's family as God had taken away the kingdom from the family of King Saul before David. Let's read the Davidic covenant:

2 Samuel 7:12-16

- 12 "When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.
- 13 "He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

- 14 "I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men.
- 15 "But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you.
- 16 "And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever."

The reason for this indestructibility is that there would ultimately be a Son of David, a Davidic king, who would be holy, harmless and undefiled. There would be a Son of David who would live a sinless life, who would obey God perfectly and completely in every thought, word and action. There would be a Son of David who would establish an everlasting reign over a kingdom that would never fall. Jesus is the reason that the stem of Jesse is indestructible.

This reference to Jesus as the Rod from the stem of Jesse points to Jesus' family tree and His human origins. Jesus was fully human, but there were also many things unique and special about Jesus. He was born of a virgin, He was fully divine and God's Spirit was upon Him without measure. This passage refers to the last of these, and that brings us to our second point, which is the Spirit.

The Greek word "Christ" and the Hebrew word "Messiah" mean the Anointed One. Isaiah prophesied here and elsewhere that God would anoint the Messiah with the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 11:1-2

- 1 There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.
- 2 The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, ...

Isaiah 42:1

- 1 "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; ...

Isaiah 61:1

- 1 "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; ...

Some may ask why this was necessary, since Jesus already had a fully divine nature to empower Him. Why did He also need the indwelling Holy Spirit? The reason for this is really simple: God the Son does not do the work of God the Spirit. God the Son does not do the work of God the Spirit, not even in relation to Jesus. It is the work of God the Spirit to indwell and to uphold and to empower the human spirit. So the divine nature of Jesus upholds and empowers Jesus' human nature, not directly but through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In this regard also, Jesus is our brother. In this regard also, Jesus is fully human. Thus we read in Matthew 12:28:

- 28 "But if I cast out demons **by the Spirit of God**, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.

And in Luke 4:14:

14 Then Jesus returned **in the power of the Spirit** to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region.

And in Acts 10:38:

38 "...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth **with the Holy Spirit and with power**, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

John the Baptist knew for sure that Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed One, when he saw, at the time of Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit coming down upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

John 1:32-34

32 And John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.

33 "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

34 "And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

Our passage for today refers to the Holy Spirit with a sevenfold description. This is why, even though there is only one Holy Spirit, the book of Revelation at times refers to the Holy Spirit as the seven Spirits of God. For example, in Revelation chapter 5, Jesus is described as a Lamb "having seven horns and seven

eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”

In our passage for today, there is first a reference to the Spirit of the LORD, the Spirit of Jehovah, which rests upon the Messianic Son of David. Then there is a list of three pairs of attributes or qualities which the Spirit imparts to the Messiah. Three times two is six, and six plus one is seven. So this is a sevenfold description of the Holy Spirit.

This particular sevenfold description of the Holy Spirit brings to mind another tree, a ceremonial tree, a tree of light, the Menorah, the golden lampstand found first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. The golden lampstand was made in the form of an almond tree with seven branches, each branch holding a lamp burning olive oil to give forth light. There is a central vertical branch, and three symmetrical pairs of branches coming out from the central branch. In the sevenfold description found here in Isaiah chapter 11, the Holy Spirit is like the vertical branch of the golden lampstand. Then the six branches coming from the central branch represent these three pairs of attributes or qualities which the Spirit imparts to the Messiah. These three pairs of Spirit imparted attributes are gifts of perception, gifts of power and gifts of piety.

The two Spirit endowed gifts of perception are wisdom and understanding. Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge to life in a practical way and to live out the truth. Understanding is the ability to discern, to see things as they really are, to divide rightly the good from the bad, the true from the false, the moral from the immoral, the helpful from the harmful.

The two Spirit endowed gifts of power are counsel and might. Counsel is the ability to plan wisely, to lay out good strategy, to choose the appropriate goals and the appropriate means to accomplish those goals, to make wise decisions. Might is the practical ability to implement those plans and decisions with energy and effectiveness. These two gifts remind us of two of the titles given to the Messiah in Isaiah chapter nine: Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God.

The two Spirit endowed gifts of piety are knowledge and the fear of the LORD. Truly Jesus knew God in a unique way, and not merely with theoretical head knowledge but also with practical experiential knowledge.

John 1:18

18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Matthew 11:27

27 All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

Jesus possessed knowledge and the fear of the LORD. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. It means to respect God as God and to acknowledge all His special prerogatives. It means to have the attitude expressed in the prayer, “Your will be done, not mine.” Even though Jesus was fully divine

Himself, He freely and fully submitted to the will of the Father. The classic expression of this is found in Philippians 2:5-8:

- 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,
6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery
to be equal with God,
7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a
bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.
8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled
Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even
the death of the cross.

We have looked at the Sprout and the Spirit. Jesus as the Son of David was anointed with the Holy Spirit who gifted Him for His work. Our last point is the Strategy, Jesus' strategy for ruling. This strategy applied to Jesus' ministry upon earth, but it is especially relevant to His current session at the right hand of God. He now has all authority in heaven and on earth, and is ruling the nations as the Lord of history. In His office as King, He has subdued us to Himself by the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Spirit in our hearts. He is ruling and defending us. He is restraining and conquering all His and our enemies. That is His work as King, and our passage gives us His strategy for doing this work.

We read that Jesus delights in the fear of the LORD. The fear of the LORD is to Jesus a sweet smelling savor. Jesus delights in submitting to God, whose very character is the final measure of what is right, what is good, what is true and what is beautiful. This is the guiding goal and the motivation of Jesus' reign and rule.

His administration is also uniquely informed. Jesus knows. If we have difficulties and problems, Jesus knows about it. Most rulers administer justice based solely on what they see and hear, on their impressions of appearances. Jesus' rule is based on an absolutely comprehensive knowledge. He knows not only what people do and say but also all that is in their heart. He knows comprehensively the total context in which to rightly judge every action and every event.

His administration is equitable and just. The poor and the meek are those with no material riches with which to offer bribes to judges or to hire the best lawyers. The poor are those who most often treated unjustly in the courts. Jesus in His administration will treat them justly.

As to the wicked, it does not matter how rich and powerful they are, Jesus will judge them rightly according to their deeds. This passage reminds us of Jesus' awesome power. He does not need armies nor weapons of mass destruction. His sword proceeds from His mouth. He merely has to speak the word, and the wicked are slain.

2 Thessalonians 2:8

8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming.

Finally, Jesus is prepared for the struggle which will bring in His kingdom. He is girded with righteousness and faithfulness.

Being girded with a belt is a metaphor for being prepared for the struggle. His righteousness is His commitment to God's righteous standards, and His faithfulness is His commitment to the course of establishing that righteousness in history. He will disciple the nations and bring in God's kingdom progressively through history and perfectly at His second coming.

Beloved, this is the basis for our hope. Even when things are bad and they appear to be getting worse, we are not to despair. We need to take the long view of events from the perspective of faith. Jesus has already won the battle against Satan and the world and the wicked. Jesus has already made us at peace with God. He did all these things through His life of perfect obedience and His atoning death as a finished sacrifice to pay for sin and His resurrection from the dead. He has won the victory already, and now He is working all that happens to bring in His kingdom in a way which brings the greatest glory to God.

When difficult times threaten to get you down, stop and meditate on Jesus. Meditate on who He is. Meditate on what He did for you on the cross. Meditate on His current position of power. Meditate on His promises. Meditate on His inevitable success. Meditate on His future return. Keep your eyes upon Jesus, and He will be your Light in the midst of a darkened world.